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ABSTRACT

As a student, a woman felt herself to be a "grammatically correct failure at writing." Having flunked high school junior English for failing to turn in a research paper on time, she later failed to learn as an undergraduate how to teach others to write. Though she was to teach a creative writing course for high school juniors and seniors, her career was interrupted by the birth of her son. Returning to the classroom to teach efficient reading to continuing education students, her class was canceled because few students registered. The teacher agreed to serve as writing mentor for the one student who showed up for the class. Working with the student for 13 months, the teacher taught both herself and her student how to write. After 8 years of teaching only reading, the teacher rediscovered the dynamic experience of writing while immersed in writing through the teaching of both journalism and "Writing for the College Bound." Only in looking back upon the experience with the single student did the teacher realize how both student and teacher learned writing from one another. (SG)

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YES, MARGIE, I TOO HAVE EVOLVED

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YES, MARGIE, I TOO HAVE EVOLVED

I imagine all teachers feel that their emergence to a teacher of the writing process was an eerie experience. It is no different for me. For me it was eerie to feel the spontaneity creep into each successive unit plan I created. First I added a bit more freedom of choice to the assignments; then I actually stated I would schedule larger blocks of in-class writing time. A little addition here, a little addition there--to feel my mind soar with the joy of new ideas, new strategies, to lift me above my endless pool of stagnation. I felt the new ideas quicken by step. Even this month of class my step continues to quicken with the excitement of even more new strategies learned. I have felt that these sensations are the singular events that lift me from the depression of my one regret, that I am not teaching in the classroom to use these new strategies.

Where did these sensations all begin, from what warm incubation did they spring? I call it evolving. I have been evolving into writing for a lifetime, ever since those painful days in college Advanced Honors Freshman English when two successive essays returned with Dr. Griebling's indelible F's on them signaled to me that I was a **grammatically correct failure at writing**.

Those weren't the first flags of writing failure I received. In high school junior English I failed a research paper because I was so lost on the "process" of writing a research paper. I carefully created letter-perfect notecards, but I could not move quickly enough to "evolving" those notecards into an organized research paper. The day before the paper was due I stayed home to try to muddle through the writing process since no drafting time was given in class. That day that I missed class Mr. Witter advised the class that anyone who did not pass in his/her paper on the due date would automatically fail for the term. You guessed it. I didn't quite muddle through the whole writing process in one day. Again I had not evolved into a writer.

Instead I had failed English for the term and the inequity of the system allowed me to earn High Honor Roll. My teacher was so apologetic for having to fail his star eleventh grade English student that I couldn't be angry for not having been taught or modeled the processes of writing a research paper. My reaction was to assuage his embarrassment at having to carry out his class edict delivered the day I was absent. Tom Romano cautions teachers not to make such absurd grading criteria to motivate students to write.

In my undergraduate Methods and Materials for Teaching English Course, I thought, "Now it will happen." I personally may not be able to write but this knowledgeable professor will teach me to teacher others to write, and through this process I will learn to write. It did not happen. The professor did not allocate his class time well so the course covered methods and materials for teaching grammar and literature, but **not** composition. *Again* I had not evolved into a writer.

Undergraduate graduation had arrived. I was so proud that I was the first college graduate in both my parents' families. Only two others graduated from high school in two generations of mother's family, none in Dad's. Dad had only completed the fifth grade. Yet, in spite of my graduating Cum Laude and all my pride in merely having a degree, I was insecure to write for any audience, except writing an essay test question. On my own I had deduced the process of synthesizing ideas for an essay question but not the process for any other writing. I was so retarded in my evolution to writing that I was too intimidated to attempt graduate school. I truly felt that I had reached my educational endpoint.

I sufficiently convinced each of my first three department chairpersons that I was a Gifted Education teacher so that the third school into which my husband's life transferred us I was assigned a plum assignment: teaching a Creative Writing class to gifted juniors and seniors. Oh,

my. I had glibly assured the administration that I was a Gifted Education mentor. Now I had to teach this course about which I myself not only knew nothing but, furthermore, had not personally accomplished even the rudiments. In September, I hastily began to forcefeed myself writing principles as fast as I could deduce them, my learning curve only slightly ahead of the class. The mainstay of my writing principles was to train my students to be precise, discerning observers of detail so that they could choose the exact words to craft a concrete, vivid image for their readers. In "The Bible According to Valentine," as I termed it for my students' notebooks, they were to "hit the Basil on the Rathbone" with each word they chose for their images. The other writing discovery to which I evolved, as if by blind stumble, was that these students of writing needed large chunks of writing time. I remember dragging my husband's lava lamp into class, heating it up before class, and playing Scheherazade so my class could write whatever fantasy stories the cascading, molten, flowing lava and sweet strains of Scheherazade percolated in their young minds.

The wonder of childbirth and the joy of a first child curtailed my evolution into a teacher of creative writing. Please don't discount the geographic isolation of being plopped eight months pregnant in Dixville Notch to have this beautiful baby boy. I wasn't just far from the maddening crowd; it was just plain maddening to be so removed from family, civilization, and universities of higher learning. Culture shock, culture deprivation are mild terms for what I experienced the next three years. I was concerned that intellectual atrophy had set in. Furthermore, the after shock of this untimely relocation tossed me around another three years.

My metamorphosis into a teacher of creative writing was certainly dead, I thought, when I contacted University of New Hampshire's Continuing Education Division to teach Speed Reading in night classes. Quite a brash proposal for me since I then quickly had to research

speed reading techniques and assemble a curriculum and syllabus. After two successful years teaching my Efficient Reading course, I again boldly approached the director to teach an evening writing course. The director was amenable, offered the course, but insufficient students registered so the course died. Except for one meek, gentle soul who appeared the first night of class: Margie Chamberlain.

Margie had a story to write and needed a writing instructor so she contracted me privately to be her writing mentor. Throughout one bitter winter Margie traveled twice, sometimes three times a week, from Wolfeboro to Laconia to write in my living room. Amidst dust-flickering shafts of sunlight mantling us as we wrote, I taught both myself and Margie to write. I avariciously read volumes on the art of creative writing to impart my new-found knowledge to an eager Margie. For thirteen precious months Margie and I laughed, welled with tears, grew to be soulmates--as we wrote her novel, KAUIA NEI.

Margie dedicated her novel to me. As Margie had evolved into a writer, I had evolved into a passionate teacher of writing. However, I still had not written a line of my own, only revisions of Margie's lines.

That next fall I secured my return to teaching--as a teacher of Reading, not of Writing. The two were distinctly separate then. For the next eight years I forgot, practically unlearned, all the wonderful discoveries about the importance of immersion in writing I had learned with my Margie. "Crisp sensory details," "vivid, forceful verbs," "sentences that trip and flow on each other" were replaced by dull exercise books artificially imparting sentence after sentence to drill the reading skill strands in isolation with a separate book devoted to each skill strand: Main Idea, Sequence, Inference, Locating Details.

A new stage in my evolution occurred. The skill strand malady evolved me into an automaton, lifelessly grading the post-test to each reading skill strand booklet my remedial reading students completed, administering pre- and post-tests that clearly identified the superior progress my students were making. But the only enthusiasm for reading that was generated was imparted by me, like a cheerleader, to keep my students working in those morbid, stupefying skill strand booklets.

Two developments occurred simultaneously during the Skill Strand Malady phase of my evolution. Stephen Tessler assigned me to teach not one but both the junior/senior writing electives, Writing for the College Bound and Journalism, and the essence of what had made writing such a dynamic experience for Margie and me resurfaced in my life: total immersion in writing, day after day; individual conferencing; writing for large chucks of times; rehearsing together until we both saw what she had experienced there far from her maddening crowd; reading her piece aloud to train her writer's ear and her inner voice as she took ownership of her writing; becoming so passionate about writing to the exclusion of everything else in our lives; my enthusiasm for writing bursting through all meek, gentle Margie's academic and physiological barriers to writing; actively participating in the writing process with my pupil; and, most importantly, my retreating from the stature of teacher to a position of friend, fellow-writer and facilitator.

The exciting part of all this for me is that I never wrote a syllabus or curriculum for Margie and me. These principles just evolved naturally from within me as progressively more language flowed from within Margie to the paper. It is eerie to write of this because only now that the words I write this moment are evolving inside me have I ever truly experienced what Donald Graves writes of students and teachers at work learning from each other. Only now on

this page have I ever realized that is precisely how Margie and I created such electric magic. She charged me and I charged her in a continuous chain reaction of each of us evolving into writers. No more teacher, no more student, just two writers writing.